

Cleveland State University  
**EngagedScholarship@CSU**



---

ETD Archive

---

2017

# Wharton's Library: For Born Readers Only

Christine Primisch  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

## Recommended Citation

Primisch, Christine, "Wharton's Library: For Born Readers Only" (2017). *ETD Archive*. 952.  
<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/952>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Archive by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

WHARTON'S LIBRARY: FOR BORN READERS ONLY

CHRISTINE PRIMISCH

Bachelor of Arts in English

The Ohio State University

December 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

THIS THESIS IS HEREBY APPROVED FOR

CHRISTINE PRIMISCH

Candidate for the Master of Arts in English degree

for the Department of English

&

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

College of Graduate Studies

By

---

Thesis Chairperson, Dr. Adam Sonstegard

---

Department of English/Date

---

Thesis Committee Member, Dr. Rachel Carnell

---

Department of English/Date

---

Thesis Committee Member, Dr. Jennifer Jeffers

---

Department of English/Date

4 May 2017

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the bright and never dimming memory of Dorothy A. Muhic.

You instilled in me a love of reading and were an endless source of encouragement for  
which I will always be grateful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot express enough thanks to my committee for their time and support: Dr. Adam Sonstegard, Dr. Rachel Carnell, and Dr. Jennifer Jeffers. Special thanks to Dr. Sonstegard and Dr. Carnell for their generosity of time and encouragement throughout my time at Cleveland State.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of my education than the members of my family. I would like to especially thank my mother, whose love and encouragement has driven all of my dreams and accomplishments.

# WHARTON'S LIBRARY: FOR BORN READERS ONLY

CHRISTINE PRIMISCH

## ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton is known for her depictions of the changing New York aristocracy and marriage market in the early twentieth-century. Critics have previously examined Wharton's views on upper-class New York society and social climbers attempting to insert themselves into that society. What has not been studied as extensively in existing criticism is the way in which the exponential increases in the size of the reading public and the type of literature available at the time Wharton was publishing negatively impacted Wharton's perception of the lower-class and *nouveau riche* readers and caused insecurities over her literary legacy. These insecurities influence her depictions of these classes within her writing specifically as they take part in the act of reading and decorating libraries. It is in the libraries owned and inhabited by Wharton's characters where we can see what Wharton considers proper upper-class behavior and where she grants exceptions to her rules.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   THE MECHANICAL READER AS ADVERSARY .....	8
III.  LIBRARIES AS REFLECTIONS OF READERS .....	14
IV.   BORN AND MECHANICAL READERS IN <i>THE HOUSE OF MIRTH</i> .....	19
V.    UNDINE SPRAGG AS MECHANICAL READER .....	24
VI.   COUNTESS OLENSKA: SOCIETY OUTSIDER AND BORN READER .....	33
VII.  CONCLUSION: WHARTON'S BORN READER AND THE WOMAN WHO LOVES HIM .....	37
WORKS CITED .....	42

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton's writing career began at a time in which the size of the reading public increased exponentially and began to include those in middle and lower social classes. Mass literacy had become a reality, magazines grew in popularity, and books were more readily available for readers<sup>1</sup>. The illiteracy rate in the United States dropped to 10.7% in 1900 down from 20% in 1870<sup>2</sup>. During the turn of the twentieth-century, the distance between serious (highbrow) literature and popular (lowbrow) works of literature was also increasing. The terms highbrow and lowbrow refer here to the class in which

---

<sup>1</sup> The Norton Anthology of English Literature period introduction for the Twentieth Century

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970; and Current Population Reports, Series P-23, Ancestry and Language in the United States: November 1979.

These numbers take into account the entire population. However, it should be noted that the illiteracy rate amongst different sub-sets of the population varied greatly. The National Center for Education Statistics notes: "In 1870, 20 percent of the entire adult population was illiterate, and 80 percent of the black population was illiterate. By 1900 the situation had improved somewhat, but still 44 percent of blacks remained illiterate. The statistical data show significant improvements for black and other races in the early portion of the 20th century as the former slaves who had no educational opportunities in their youth were replaced by younger individuals who grew up in the post-Civil War period and often had some chance to obtain a basic education. The gap in illiteracy between white and black adults continued to narrow through the 20th century, and in 1979 the rates were about the same." For more information on this, see *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Edited by Tom Snyder, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).



contemporary critics and general reception placed a book<sup>3</sup>. This distinction between highbrow and lowbrow literature and their respective audiences impacted writers of the time as well as readers. Wharton's writing career began with publications in mass-circulation magazines. Wharton published in a variety of magazines in her career, but most often in *Scribner's*, which was seen as a more prestigious magazine, among the likes of *Century* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, rather than other tabloid magazines also in mass-circulation.

Early in her writing career, Wharton expressed concerns about the changing reading public and the ways in which texts were read. In her 1903 essay "The Vice of Reading," Wharton disparages those who approach reading as a task, abandoning lowbrow books for highbrow literature in an attempt to prove that they, like the high society readers of highbrow literature, understood and appreciated serious literature. To Wharton, the desire to read serious literature is linked to a desire for social climbing. By taking on the reading of serious literature, this group of readers can prove to the upper class society that they too belong, with which Wharton does not seem to agree. Wharton would rather this group of people continue reading lowbrow literature rather than treating reading highbrow literature as a task to complete. The problem, according to Wharton, is not that this lowbrow writing exists or that it has a ready audience; in fact, she writes: "He who feasts upon 'the novel of the day' does not seriously impede the development of literature" ("Vice" 514). Rather, it is those readers who enjoy and want to read this type

---

<sup>3</sup> Debate about the terms "highbrow," "lowbrow," and even "middlebrow" and how art is categorized amongst them is wide ranging and ongoing. For more information, Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999) provide interesting histories of the idea of a cultural hierarchy.

of lowbrow writing but think they are also capable of reading, understanding, and appreciating serious literature merely because they dedicate time to reading who present a problem for Wharton. Wharton labels this group of readers as “mechanical readers” (514). The mechanical reader, according to Wharton, is particularly harmful when it comes to critiquing literature: “It is when the mechanical reader, armed with the high conception of his duty, invades the domain of letters—discusses, criticises, condemns, or, worse still, praises—that the vice of reading becomes a menace to literature” (515). Wharton believes that only “born readers” are capable of properly understanding serious literature. Mechanical readers are incapable of “using it [the book] as the keynote of unpremeditated harmonies, as the gateway into some *paysage choisi* of the spirit, is beyond his ken” (516). For Wharton, the act of reading is “an interchange of thought between writer and reader” and this exchange does not occur with the mechanical reader (513). Wharton expounds on this reader-writer exchange when she notes:

The value of books is proportionate to what may be called their plasticity—their quality of being all things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought. Where, from one cause or the other, his reciprocal adaptability is lacking, there can be no real intercourse between book and reader. In this sense it may be said that there is no abstract standard of values in literature: the greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them. The best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality; but it is generally from these books that the poor reader gets least. (514)

Only a few years later Wharton would see the reception for her novel, *The House of Mirth*, critiqued—not only by word of mouth, but also in the *New York Times* book review pages—by mechanical readers who perceived the fate of Lily Bart as the result of a cruel author rather than the result of Lily’s own incessant attempts at social climbing (Blair 154).

The two groups of readers whom Wharton identifies, the born readers and mechanical readers, each seem to have distinct social class associations. Wharton makes a point to include in her essay that being a “poor reader” might be a “misfortune,” but it is “certainly not a fault” (514). She equates the skill of reading creatively to that of mastering a musical instrument. Wharton goes on to describe the comparison of mechanical and born readers: “they [the mechanical readers] seem to regard literature as a cable-car that can be ‘boarded’ only by running; while many a born reader may be found unblushingly loitering in the tea-cup times of stage-coach and posting-chaise, without so much as being aware of the new means of locomotion” (515). One cannot help but see a class difference in this description. The description of mechanical reader calls to mind a mode of undignified, and segregated, mass transit frequented by the working class, whereas the born reader enjoys leisure time, traveling in a slower, albeit less technologically advanced manner. It seems no surprise that Wharton, whose works so clearly present the upper-class Old New York society as superior to that of the *nouveau riche* and working classes, should categorize readers by class as well.

Wharton’s views on the importance of proper reading behavior call to mind Henry David Thoreau’s words about reading in *Walden* in 1854, nearly fifty years before Wharton takes up the subject. Thoreau writes:

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will tax the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. (99)

Thoreau’s musings on reading also imply a class bias similar to what we infer in Wharton’s essay. Thoreau writes of the importance of reading classics, specifically,

reading classics in their native languages: “Those who have not learned to read the ancient classics in the language in which they were written must have a very imperfect knowledge of the history of the human race” (101). The ability to read a text in Greek and Latin as a prerequisite to the “noble exercise” of reading assumes an education level only those of higher social classes would have been able to afford to receive. Thoreau disdained those who do only “easy reading” instead of the “golden words” of the “wisest men” of antiquity (104). He goes on to state: “I confess that I do not make any very broad distinction between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all, and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects” (105). While Wharton accepts those who read lowbrow, popular literature as long as they do not attempt to read and criticize highbrow literature, Thoreau makes no allowances for those who read anything other than the classics.

Although the focus for Wharton, and Thoreau, is the individual reader, Wharton continues her argument about the problems that arise with mechanical reading by extending it to the impact upon authors. Wharton concludes her essay by saying that the mechanical reader is most harmful to the writer:

The broad way that leads to his approval is so easy to read and so thronged with prosperous fellow-travelers that many a young pilgrim has been drawn into it by the mere craving for companionship; and perhaps it is not until the journey’s end, when he reaches the Palace of Platitudes and sits down to a feast of indiscriminate praise, with the scribblers he has most despised helping themselves unreprieved out of the very dish prepared in his honor, that his thoughts turn longingly to that other way—the strait path leading “To The Happy Few.” (520-521)

This concluding statement hints at Wharton’s insecurities about the place in literature her oeuvre would inhabit and the possibility that it may be mistaken and misunderstood as lowbrow writing rather than highbrow literature among that of Henry James and her other

close, literary friends.

At the time she wrote “The Vice of Reading,” Wharton had already begun her writing career, publishing poems, decorating books, short stories, and three novels. In fact, at this point in her career, Wharton had already received mixed reviews. In *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, Helen Killoran writes: “The early reviewers who wrote about her praised her craftsmanship, but those who came later smilingly dismissed her work as something to be put in a drawer with a lavender sachet, to be removed some long time later and read with sighs and sentiment” (3). Wharton had received reviews exclaiming the quality of her writing, such as one that appeared in 1899: “Mrs. Wharton writes with the finished ease of the skilled craftsman, and with the feeling and distinction of the artist” (9). She also had reviewers question her ability. Specifically, her ability to portray men, as noted in *Munsey’s Magazine*: “Her men are subtle and complex ladies wearing mustaches” rather than assuming that this portrayal of men was a choice, the critic assumes it is a shortcoming (9). This type of review would certainly have contributed to Wharton’s insecurities and provided motivation for writing “The Vice of Reading.” These insecurities over her own, eventual literary niche lie at the root of Wharton’s disdain for lower- and *nouveau riche*-classes and also informed her literary depictions of these classes as they were engaged in reading and decorating libraries in Wharton’s works. I will demonstrate here the ways in which Wharton uses libraries and the books within them as a commentary on the reading public. Wharton’s depictions of libraries in her works can be read as reflections of the male characters’ personalities and provide glimpses into her disapproval of the *nouveau riche* society as compared to the old New York society and what she perceives as their respective reading habits. It is in the

libraries of the characters in Wharton's works where we can see that although Wharton's views on upper class superiority seem unchanging, she will make allowances to accept upper-class women who may not generally be accepted by their peers, if the women fit the mold Wharton has created in other ways. Specifically, Countess Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* and Lizzie Hazeldean in *Old New York* behave in ways that society looks down upon but Wharton does not. Countess Olenska is separated from her husband, leading her own life apart from his, and Lizzie Hazeldean had affairs while she was married yet they escape Wharton's condemnation. Not only are there similarities between the characters' marriages to Wharton's marriage, but they have also taken control of the masculine space of the library and made it their own, much like Wharton has entered into the masculine space of authoring highbrow literature. It will be the focus of this paper to read Wharton's depictions of libraries through the lens of her essay, "The Vice of Reading," in order to demonstrate her disdain for the upwardly mobile *nouveau riche*, her views on the ways in which women can take control of the gendered space of the library, and ultimately, her insecurity that her library of works may not be properly understood and categorized as serious, highbrow literature. By looking at three different novels, published at different times in her career, we can see Wharton's unrelenting disdain for mechanical readers and by extension, social climbers, despite that audience being a significant contributing factor to her success as an author.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MECHANICAL READER AS ADVERSARY

For Wharton, mechanical readers do harm to more than just themselves in their reading and misunderstanding of serious literature. Whereas some authors may merely be disappointed to know that a reader does not fully understand or appreciate his or her writing, Wharton considers this an assault on the literary community. Her most basic critique of the mechanical reader is that “He admits the cleverness [of a work of literature], of course; but one of the characters is ‘not nice’; *ergo* the book is not nice; he is surprised that you should have cared to read it” (517). This description deals with the mechanical reader at a superficial level. Wharton goes on to write at length about the other, more detrimental ways in which the mechanical reader is harmful. She breaks down four groups which are harmed by the mechanical reader: authors, culture, literature, and critics. Wharton writes:

The harmfulness of the mechanical reader is fourfold. In the first place, by bringing about the demand for mediocre writing, he facilitates the career of the mediocre author. ... Secondly, by his passion for ‘popular’ renderings of abstruse and difficult subjects, by confounding the hastiest *réchauffé* of scientific truisms with the slowly-matured conceptions of the original thinker, he retards true culture and lessens the possible amount of really abiding work. ... The habit of confusing moral and intellectual judgements is the third cause of his harmfulness to literature. ... Finally,

the mechanical reader, by his demand for peptonized literature<sup>4</sup>, and his inability to distinguish between the means and the end, has misdirected the tendencies of criticism, or rather, has produced a creature in his own image—the mechanical critic. (519-520)

While it is the author whom she considers as the most victimized, it would seem that born readers can and should also take offense at the existence of mechanical readers. Wharton states that there are “generic signs by which the born reader detects his manufactured copy under whatever guise the latter may assume” (515). The description of these characteristics as a “guise” suggests that Wharton believes this group of readers knows that they do not belong amidst born readers and disguises themselves as to be mistaken for born readers. This parallels the way in which Wharton writes about *nouveau riche* characters, such as Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* and social climbing characters such as Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, as attempting but failing to assimilate themselves into New York high society.

In her essay “Misreading *The House of Mirth*,” Amy L. Blair wrestles with the way in which Wharton depicts Lily Bart and how the character parallels the vast majority of Wharton’s reading public. She asks the question: “Why would middle-class readers—who made up the bulk of Wharton’s audience, we must assume—take a critique of high society to heart, given the general culture’s fixation on and idealization of upward mobility?” (150) Blair focuses her essay on the middle-class, mechanical reader Wharton seems to hold in contempt and uses Wharton’s “The Vice of Reading” to support her theories of deliberate misreading. Her argument includes how reading manuals such as *What Books Can Do FOR YOU*, *Making the Most of Books*, and *Open that Door!*, which were published at the turn of the century, influenced readers of the time and how they, in

---

<sup>4</sup> “Peptonized literature” refers to simplified literature.

“Peptonized, adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 26 March 2017.



turn, spurred the popularity of Wharton. Blair insists that Wharton's works--she uses *The House of Mirth* as the example--should be read with these manuals in mind. Ultimately, Blair argues that Wharton was aware of the misreading of *The House of Mirth*, similar to the way in which the mechanical readers were aware of and willfully ignored, Wharton's message about upward mobility, instead placing blame for Lily's fate on the cruel author.

Blair's essay is useful as a glimpse into the reader-writer relationship between Wharton and her middle-class readers. This relationship was a complex one, and Blair points out that "Wharton herself, as an astute businesswoman, was aware of the potential aesthetic impact as well as the probable economic impact of the 'mechanical reader.' In short, her relationship with her middlebrow readers was more complex than simple disdain" (153-154). Blair asserts that many readers of *The House of Mirth* would have been practicing "reading up," at a time in which readers began to see performances of class as just as important as the financial aspects of class (150). The practice of reading up, for Blair, involves readers approaching "all books as how-to manuals and rewards so called misreadings that would enable vicarious participation in the lives of wealthy protagonists" (150). She goes on to explain later in her essay that "Reading up was not a passive activity; only through engagement with the text could a socially aspiring reader hope to achieve her goals. And within the value structure of class aspirations, active engagement with a society novel meant making the practices and attitudes of high society 'similar' to what one is" (Blair 156). Blair insists that "Wharton explicitly renders Lily Bart a surrogate for the upwardly mobile reader" (154). Though Blair offers Lily as a surrogate of the upwardly mobile reader, her argument focuses on the thematics of the novel and the debates it ignited. She fails to acknowledge that in the novel Lily actually

failed at reading up. Had Lily spent more time reading Percy Gryce's Americana books and engaging him in conversation on the topic, she may have been able to achieve her desired result of a society marriage.

It would seem that Wharton, although critical and disapproving of mechanical readers, acknowledged their importance in her financial success. "By noting the ways that Wharton uses the familiar language of the society column (despite her disapproval of society journalism), we can see that, regardless of her bluster about the problems of popularity in literature, she actively instructs her audience how to read not only this scene but also the whole of her novel" (158). Blair is not the only critic to examine the relationship with Wharton and her readers. Barbara Hochman discusses the reader/writer relationship in her essay "The Rewards of Representation: Edith Wharton, Lily Bart and the Writer/Reader Interchange." Hochman asserts that "Wharton saw her relationship with a large, invisible audience as a unique source of private satisfactions" (147). Hochman goes on to write about Wharton's view of the writer/reader relationship as "personal," "intimate," "on the margins of the dominant culture," while simultaneously considering herself "a paid professional doing a job, but also as a public performer—visible, exposed, and for sale" (147). While Hochman makes some compelling arguments about the art of representation, Wharton viewed her relationship with her readers much more warily than Hochman seems to acknowledge when she writes: "*The House of Mirth* suggests that at this time of her life Wharton was prepared to imagine the delights of jettisoning her audience altogether; but she was also prepared to invest, with a kind of leap of faith, in the idea of a potentially responsive and creative audience" (161). Wharton may have found satisfaction in *some* readers, specifically those whom she

would consider born readers and as such members of the old money upper class.

Gianfranca Balestra examines the way in which Wharton edits her ghost stories to fit the expectations of the reading public in her essay “‘For the Use of the Magazine Morons’: Edith Wharton Rewrites the Tale of the Fantastic.” Balestra writes that Wharton’s “relationship with the reading public and the market economy was ambiguously made up of acceptance and resistance, desire and mistrust” (13). She goes on to say that Wharton seemed willing to work with her publishers to provide readers what they wanted, yet she also was “aware of the dangers involved in lowering her standards to meet popular taste” (13). Although Wharton’s ghost stories are out of scope for this paper, Balestra’s use of Wharton’s correspondence to prove “Wharton’s artistic awareness as well as her reluctant acceptance of commercial compromise” is notable and will be used to support the claims set forth here (21). In fact, the reference to “magazine morons” in the title of her essay refers to a letter written by Wharton to Eric S. Pinker, Wharton’s literary agent, in which she writes: “I enclose herewith a new ending of ‘Week-End,’ for the use of the magazine morons. Would it help them if I called the story ‘All Souls’ as I had originally thought of doing? I leave this to you<sup>5</sup>” (21). This exchange came during the publication process for “All Souls,” during which Wharton was asked to modify the ending of the story to make it easier to understand for those readers who would be looking for an explanation to the supernatural activity of the story. Wharton wrote the letter in 1937, long after “The Vice of Reading,” proving that her relationship with the publishers of magazines and the reading public continued to be complex throughout her career. Each of these three critics takes on the relationship between

---

<sup>5</sup> Edith Wharton, Letter to Eric S. Pinker, 23 March 1937 (Wharton Collection, Box 36, Folder 1091).

Wharton and her readers, and yet there is room to complicate each of these readings by questioning what this relationship indicates about Wharton's insecurities regarding the appreciation of her literature and her biases toward the *nouveau riche* and middle-class social groups. By looking at Wharton's depictions of reading spaces and the objects within, we can see more clearly Wharton's worries about the place in literature her collection of works would inhabit.

### CHAPTER III

#### LIBRARIES AS REFLECTIONS OF READERS

The role of libraries in Wharton's writing encompasses more than the space itself; libraries are reflections of the people who own them as well as those who spend time in them. The depictions are not only based on the socioeconomic classes of the occupants of the libraries, but also the gender of the occupants. The *nouveau riche* are depicted as not behaving or appreciating the rooms and books properly, and women, regardless of class, are often depicted as out of place in the library. A majority of the criticism that exists about libraries in Wharton's writing analyzes the architectural aspect of the libraries as well as other rooms and buildings in her works<sup>6</sup>. Still more critics have chosen to look at

---

<sup>6</sup> Wharton authored books on architecture and interior design: *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). Critics have paid significant attention to Wharton's use of architecture and interior design in her fictional works. Judith Fryer, Vanessa Chase, and architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson read Wharton's fictional works with her design aesthetic in mind. Some of these approaches take on the socio-economic implications of Wharton's fiction and others focus on the how her personal relationships with ex-husband Edward Wharton impacted her architectural interests. These critics, among others, follow and often cite the earlier Wharton feminist critics. Criticism of the 1960s and 70s tended to acknowledge Wharton's criticism of traditions and conventions of old New York society, but also assumes that she chose to remain a part of it. Many feminist critics (including, but not limited to, Margaret McDowell, Elizabeth Ammons, Wendy Gimbel, Carol Wershoven, and Annette Zilversmit) recognize Wharton's insights into the social structures of the early part of the twentieth century and the ways in which these structures influenced and limited women's lives.

the relationship between Wharton's architectural passions and her literary works as it relates to novelistic form. Liisa Stephenson's article "Decorating Fiction: Edith Wharton's Literary Architecture" suggests that Wharton "characterizes the modern novel as a product of design. Just as a well-designed house reflects the architectural principles on which it was founded, the novel is constructed according to theories of design that reflect the author's aesthetic principles" (1097). Stephenson examines the trope of the library in *The House of Mirth* to illustrate that Wharton articulates "her central theory of the novel—that literature, like architecture, must glance backwards before it can move forward" (1097). Of particular interest to this examination of Wharton's use of libraries in her fiction, is Stephenson's acknowledgment of the place of privilege libraries and books hold within Wharton's fiction. According to Stephenson, "while Wharton's library episodes are often scenes of tranquility or rest, these scenarios almost always involve men alone, either reading or thinking. When a woman is introduced to the scene, the library becomes a site of unpredictability or conflict...the library is a locus of modernist revisionism in Wharton's fiction, particularly in terms of gender and class" (1100). Stephenson uses close readings of *The House of Mirth* to provide evidence of Wharton's "affinity for the architecture of the library" as many of the most important scenes in her fiction take place in libraries. The gender implications and tensions these scenes create will be examined further here.

Additionally, critics note that libraries figure centrally in much of Wharton's fiction acknowledging their position in the home as a masculine domain. For example, in her 2007 book *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton*, Annette Benert primarily agrees with the notion that Wharton maintains the traditions and values of her old New

York society upbringing asserted by critics of the 1960s and 70s. Benert remarks on the gender divide of the home by noting: "the nineteenth-century nuclear family entailed a shift away from the producing to the consuming household and from a gendered division of labor to a two-sphere society, in which the male governed the public and productive life of the family and the female its consumption and domestic activities and relationships" (113). There is room for the complication of this assumption as well. Specifically in how the role of books and libraries in Wharton's works reflect Wharton's views of the men of the old New York society and the *nouveau riche* has yet to be examined.

Although commonly considered to have control over the domestic sphere, a woman does not have absolute control because men still have control of at least one of their own rooms in the house: the library. Further complications arise when viewing the libraries through the lens of the old New York society as opposed to that of the *nouveau riche*. Wharton uses the libraries and the books within them to reflect the male characters' personalities and in doing so provides glimpses into her disapproval of the *nouveau riche* society as compared to the old New York society. By using the library as a reflection of male personality, Wharton reminds readers that while the interior of the home may be known as the woman's domain, it remains a reflection of the social class of the men in her life and a reminder that a woman never fully controls her home or herself. Wharton provides exceptions to this general rule. Wharton projects herself upon and most often encourages sympathy and identification with, women who possess libraries, where they also exhibit more self-possession than other women of the time. This examination of books and libraries can, in turn, be read with "The Vice of Reading" in mind in order to

understand how Wharton's depictions of types of readers in her works reflect the belief that just as the art of reading cannot be taught, nor can proper class behavior.

Wharton published *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) with architect Ogden Codman, Jr. and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) before publishing her first novels and short stories. Critics have commented extensively on the influence Wharton's interest in understanding architecture and interior design had on her career as a novelist<sup>7</sup>. Of particular interest to this study is Wharton's view that "the average American home offered too little room for the pursuit of individual pleasures and ambitions, especially for women. Whereas men would have their libraries, the family room would often double as the lady's room" (van der Werf 183). Traditional domesticity, as reflected in the architecture and the decoration of homes, does not allow women to establish "a room of one's own."<sup>8</sup>

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton does not shy away from setting rules for how to decorate rooms typically used and designed by men. She describes the proper library, though she does not comment directly on its intended purpose by the men of the family:

The general decoration of the library should be of such character as to form a background or setting to the books, rather than to distract attention

---

<sup>7</sup>It is not the focus of this essay to re-examine that relationship. Els van der Werf summarizes the relationship as manifesting itself "at three levels. Firstly, the financial and emotional investment in the construction and decoration of her own homes...shows that she was determined to create the physical conditions that she needed to develop her literary career. Secondly, her books on architecture, interior decoration, and garden design formed an important part of her authorial self-construction...and thirdly, Wharton's fascination for houses and their interiors continued to surface in her fictional work" (181-182). For more commentary on this relationship see criticism by Annette Benert, Theresa Craig, Vanessa Chase, Judith Fryer, and Sarah Luria.

<sup>8</sup>Although Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was not published until 1929, we can see based on Wharton's comments in *The Decoration of Houses*, that the physical restrictions of women in the home were recognized long before Woolf penned her essay.



from them. The richly adorned room in which books are but a minor incident is, in fact, no library at all. There is no reason why the decorations of a library should not be splendid; but in that case the books must be splendid too, and sufficient in number to dominate all the accessory decorations of the room...The housing of a great private library is one of the most interesting problems of interior architecture. (150-151)

Keeping Wharton's directives on the decoration of libraries and the description of born readers in mind, one can use them as a means to decipher which characters in her fiction may not meet the approval of old money society, but succeed in meeting her approval. Wharton follows her own rules outlined in *The Decoration of Houses* to design the old New York society homes in her fictional works while the homes of the *nouveau riche* tend not to follow these rules and illustrate instead what Wharton would consider improper interior design. Wharton also projects the description of born readers from "The Vice of Reading" upon those occupying the libraries, signaling her approval of them despite the critiques she applies to the upper class throughout her works.

## CHAPTER IV

### BORN AND MECHANICAL READERS IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

In *The House of Mirth* (1905), the social-climbing Lily Bart personifies Wharton's ideas of a mechanical reader, and yet while Wharton depicts many different libraries, not all of the upper-class characters inhabiting those libraries are born readers as one may expect. The sense of superiority of old New York society over the *nouveau riche* can be seen in Lawrence Selden's library. Selden's library is "a small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books" (8; bk. I ch. I). Distinctly different than the Americana collector Percy Gryce, Selden states: "I'm not really a collector, you see; I simply like to have good editions of the books I am fond of" (11; bk. I ch. I). Selden seems to be the epitome of a born reader. Selden's comment about simply liking what he is fond of calls to mind Wharton's statement that a born reader "may or may not wish to hear what the critics have to say of a book; but if he cares for any criticism he wants the only kind worthy of the name—an analysis of subject and manner" (Vice 520). Even Selden's parents appreciated good books; their house was described as "shabby," but "exquisitely kept; if there were good books on the shelves there were also good dishes on the table" (120; bk. I ch. XIV). Although Selden may not have the kind of money Lily hopes to marry into,

the narrator seems to be noting the good character of the family as seen in their relationship to books.

Lily appreciates the sense of peace in the room and beauty of the books: “Some of the volumes had the ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco, and her eyes lingered on them caressingly, not with the appreciation of the expert, but with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities” (10; bk. I ch. I). Wharton uses Lily’s comfort in the room to again lament on women’s lack of their own private spaces; Lily states: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (8; bk. I ch. I). Interestingly, Lily equates not having one’s own space with being a woman, rather than relating it to an inability to afford a space. Lily’s lack of self-awareness is on display in this statement. Selden’s library provides sanctuary to Lily one more time in the novel. When Lily has decided to make use of Bertha’s letters in an attempt to restore her position in society, she passes by the Benedick and upon contemplation of her history with Selden “she has a vision of his quiet room, of the bookshelves, and the fire on the hearth” (237; bk. II ch. XI). Upon entering, “the library looked as she had pictured it,” the lamplight is “tranquil,” and the “warm hearth” contrasts the cold rain of the night (237; bk. II ch. XII). Not only is Selden’s library a safe place for Lily but it also becomes a place of personal reflection. It is here, not in her room at the boarding house, that Lily says goodbye to the Lily Bart Selden knew previously. Lily tells Selden: “There is someone I must say goodbye to. Oh, not *you*—we are sure to see each other again—but the Lily Bart you knew” (240; bk. II ch. XII). Lily goes on to ask Selden to let her old self stay with him, only to realize that “she could not go forth and leave her old self with him.” (241; bk. II ch. XII) By making

this decision, Lily loses a chance to rest peacefully in the library- even if only on a spiritual level.

Selden's library and Lily's behavior within it illustrates Wharton's ideals for a library and the way in which a woman should behave—self-possessed and not scheming to social climb. This library is not the only one presented to readers. The library at Bellomont, the residence of the Trenor family is also described. It was a library “never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation” (*House* 48; bk. I ch. V). The narrator notes: “The library was almost the only surviving portion of the old manor-house of Bellomont: a long spacious room, revealing the traditions of the mother-country in its classically-cased doors, the Dutch tiles of the chimney, and the elaborate hob-grate with its shining brass urns” (48; bk. I ch. V). Even after finding out that the library is not used for reading, the narrator points out that the “shabby” books were “mostly contemporaneous with the ancestors in question, and to which the subsequent Trenors had made no perceptible additions” (48; bk. I ch. V). It would appear that older generations of the Trenor family were the born readers, and the current generation seems to be uninterested in reading. Although born readers are superior in Wharton's view, Gus and Judy Trenor should not be seen as mechanical readers. Instead, they are simply not readers at all. For Wharton, this is much preferred to those people who are not born readers, but attempt to be: “Why should we all be readers?” (“Vice” 514). While Wharton may not condemn the Trenors as mechanical readers, she does not seem to want the reader to completely like them either. The way the library's décor is described is not in keeping with the way in which Wharton believed a room should be decorated. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton insists on functionality

and simplicity rather than impractical room crowded with knick-knacks, indicating to the reader that this couple, while not completely undesirable, is not the ideal either. Mrs. Trenor does not appreciate the books and even sees Lily's marriage target Percy Gryce's collection of books as something to warn Lily about: "You know they say he has eight hundred thousand a year—and spends nothing, except on some rubbishy old books" (38; bk. I ch. IV). She describes the Gryce library as being "in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum" (20; bk. I ch. II). Gryce, however, has substantial funds left over after his spending on books. This money would be enough to support Lily and keep her in the lifestyle in which she wants to remain. Had Lily's only goal been financial security, she could have read Gryce and the situation better; she might have executed the proper upper-class behavior of attending church and showing interest in Gryce's hobby in order to achieve her goal of marrying above her station. Lily, not a born reader herself and also unwilling to properly read and react to social expectations of the upper class, misses the opportunity to marry and obtain financial security. It seems that Lily's desire for a life in which she can be happy and not burdened by the expectations of Gryce outweighs her desire for social climbing.

In "Edith Wharton's 'Secret Sensitiveness' The Decoration of Houses, and Her Fiction," Suzanne Jones comments: "The need that Lily expresses for an attractive room of her own in the first scene with Selden reveals Wharton's interest in articulating human responses to domestic spaces and in suggesting the importance of environment to emotional well-being" (13). One can also see Wharton's critique of the marriage market in which women are forced to seek out the most expensive home and richest husband. Additionally, there seems to be a critique of women who lack the literary appreciation of

books and the subtleties of life in the upper class as Lily fails to achieve the comfort and sense of well-being that can be felt in a home where the inhabitants focus on more than displaying wealth. She ends up unhappy, disinherited, and alone despite her attempts to achieve social status and wealth. However, Lily does eventually exhibit more self-realization than she did at the beginning of the novel. Before leaving Selden's library at the end of the novel, Lily burns the letters that would have given her the means to blackmail Bertha, marry Rosedale, and return to society. This act of burning letters and the associated decision to resist the urge to abandon her sense of morality in order to climb the social ladder serves as a sort of catharsis for Lily. Additionally, it is not insignificant that the letters she burns are those of another woman. In the process of becoming a morally sound working class woman—one who abandons her own societal rise and material comforts in order to save the reputations of Selden and Bertha—Lily must burn the words of another woman in the library of a man. Although Lily does not seem to appreciate books in the same way that Selden does, this scene depicts her in an “interchange of thought” with the author of a text (“Vice” 513). Lily ends her life without her own library, and even without words, as upon her deathbed, she fails to think of the word she wants to say to Selden. While Lily may not be a born reader in the way Wharton would expect, in her way, Lily comes to represent a reader who understands that there is more value to a text than just the words on the page.

## CHAPTER V

### UNDINE SPRAGG AS MECHANICAL READER

Each library described in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), Wharton's satirical representation of social climbing and tabloid culture, presents a distinctive portrait of the man who inhabits it, and only some of those men seem to fit into Wharton's preferred social group. The increasing splendor of each of the libraries presented parallels Undine's climb up the social ladder. By reading *The Custom of the Country* through the lens of "The Vice of Reading," we can see that Undine is the mechanical reader of whom Wharton is wary. Undine is guilty of reading up, as Blair puts it. She is only interested in acting a certain way in order to be perceived as part of a higher socio-economic class. Undine never understands that just as some are born readers to whom reading is like breathing, some are born to the upper class and instinctively know how one should act. Undine comes from a Midwest family with newly earned money attempting to insert themselves into New York society and manages to marry into well-respected and established, though somewhat cash poor, American and European families. Her final marriage brings her full circle back to her first Midwest husband, who by the time of their second marriage has acquired significantly more wealth and uses it in an attempt to buy

his way into an “old money” way of living. Wharton is clearly satirizing Undine’s divorcing and attempting to marry up. Interestingly, this novel about a divorcee is being published at the same time Wharton herself was going through a divorce from her husband, Teddy Wharton. It would seem that divorce may not be the point of contention, but instead the serial divorcing as a means to social climb.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the first library described is the library in Apex, which Undine compares to the Fairford residence: “the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up” (642; ch. III). Overlooking the significance of owning a library and properly displaying books, Undine cannot hide her disappointment with the Fairfield residence and the people she meets while there. The rooms of the Fairfield home seem to follow Wharton’s rules of decoration with a focus on simplicity rather than Undine’s preference for French period rooms<sup>9</sup>, which Wharton abhorred. The guests in attendance at the dinner all are from the old New York society, and yet Undine does not find them stylish enough. The negativity about the dinner leads the reader to understand that in Undine’s opinion the Fairfield residence, the people within, and the Apex library are all undesirable. However, it would seem that to Wharton, Undine is merely disillusioned about what it means to be a part of the old, established New York society in addition to

---

<sup>9</sup>In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton criticizes the French period rooms commonly found in America calling them “an epidemic of supposed ‘Marie-Antoinette’ rooms” (27). She notes that purchasers and manufacturers “Know that the rooms of the period were usually painted in light colors, and that the furniture (in palaces) was often gilt and covered in brocade; and it is taken for granted that plenty of white paint, a pale wall-paper with bow-knots, and fragile chairs dipped in liquid gilding and covered with a flowered silk-and-cotton material, must inevitably produce a ‘Marie-Antoinette’ room” (27). Wharton sees these period rooms as an example of consumers merely looking for something different with no regard to quality or design principles.



her obvious delusion about her own importance. Continuing the comparison of Undine to a mechanical reader, Wharton's description of why a mechanical reader is a menace to literature should be noted: "It is when the mechanical reader, armed with the high conception of his duty, invades the domain of letters—discusses, criticises, condemns, or worse still, praises—that the vice of reading becomes a menace to literature" (515). Undine may have been considered harmless to the society in which she wants to belong but only until she begins criticizing the society, including the décor and conversation. Just as Undine is unable to grasp the nuances of proper behavior in high society, one can imagine her as a mechanical reader who would be unable to grasp the satire in the *The Custom of the Country* and perhaps consider it to be a lowbrow, popular culture text. In this way, Undine comes to personify Wharton's insecurities about how her art is perceived and whether the popularity of her writing is beneficial or detrimental to her eventual literary legacy.

Undine seems to have no interest in or appreciation for libraries or books, except for their aesthetic appeal. She cares only for the outward appearance of books, and readers may suspect that she is the type of mechanical reader who would be unable to understand the quality of highbrow literature. Her first husband and many of his set do not appear to feel the same way about books, and are depicted as born readers. Before Ralph Marvell marries Undine, he has a home with "books jamming his old college bookcases and overflowing on chairs and tables" and his income is "enough for his frugal wants—enough to buy books (not 'editions')" (671; ch. VI). Ralph contents himself with spending his modest income solely on books, regardless of whether or not they are "editions." This description of Ralph mirrors the description of a born reader that

Wharton presented in “The Vice of Reading.” Wharton describes the born reader as someone “whose reading forms a continuous undercurrent to all his other occupations” (Vice 515). We can see this quality in Ralph not only in the way he wants little, except books, but also in how he keeps his books with him after marrying Undine even though he “had no study of his own, and he had crowded into his narrow bed-room his prints and bookshelves, and the other relics of his youth” (764; ch. XV). If the library and books contained within represent the man, then this man appears to be sentimental and romantic, keeping his college bookcases and “relics of his youth,” and more interested in the content of the books than their monetary value or what they look like on the outside. Selden’s library in *The House of Mirth* bears a resemblance to Raymond’s library in *The Custom of the Country*. One could imagine it being the type of library Ralph might have had if he could afford a home that had a library, which he might have done if Undine did not spend quite so much money on the period rooms Wharton warns against in *The Decoration of Houses*. Ralph, who cannot afford a home that has a library or the cost of “editions,” is simply not rich enough for Undine, who cares more about outward appearances of the home, its location, and what it contains. Being married to a man who does not care about the difference between books and editions and who does not have the means to own a personal library in their home becomes unbearable. Undine feels she must find a new home and man in order to become a part of the society in which she so firmly believes she belongs and which Wharton critiques.

The Chateau of Raymond de Chelles, Undine’s next husband, has a library with “brown walls of books...warm and home-like” (950; ch. XXXVIII). Clearly, Undine has made a step up in society with this marriage. The architecture of her new home compared

to her home with Ralph echoes this upward social movement. One may suspect that part of the reason the description of this library is much more positive than the one in Apex is due to it being a castle in France, rather than a shabby building in Apex or even the crowded bookshelves in Ralph's bedroom. And yet, Undine seems to belong in this library even less than in Apex. When Raymond and Undine spend time in the library, "he seemed to expect to read aloud to her from the reviews and papers he was always receiving; and when he had discovered her inability to fix her attention he fell into the way of absorbing himself in one of the old brown books with which the room was lined" (955; ch. XXXIX). Unable to keep Raymond's attention, Undine does not quite fit amongst the books he values and with which he spends so much time. Undine again humanizes Wharton's description of a mechanical reader in that "It is the delusion of the mechanical reader to think that intentions may take the place of aptitude" (515). It is not enough for Undine to simply sit and listen to Raymond read to her. Undine's inability to comprehend is clear to Raymond, the born reader, and the mismatch in their characters is clear.

Often described as alongside "old brown books," Raymond spends his time reading or among his books. Raymond is a traditional, "old money" man and this is reflected in his library and books. His books are worn and old, and yet one assumes they are in fact "editions," and not old in the sense of college days as with Ralph, but rather, old in the sense of being part of an established home that goes back centuries. Undine attempts to claim some part of the library by choosing to keep the fires lit despite the break with tradition and the criticism of her mother-in-law, but that criticism simply cements her outsider position in the library and the family as it becomes clear that she

does not understand how to run an old estate. Interestingly, it is in the library—the man’s private space—where she chooses to stage this protest. Although we might consider this a statement on women’s lack of private spaces in the home, it seems more likely that this is Wharton’s way of highlighting Undine’s lack of understanding how to be a part of old money society. This distinction that merely inhabiting a library does not make one a part of the upper class can be extended to the mechanical reader as well. Readers are born; the act of reading does not make one a reader, just as money does not make one a member of upper-class society. Undine seems to be presented as the mechanical reader who undertakes reading as a task rather than for the interchange between writer and reader. Wharton compares the mechanical reader to “a tourist who drives from one ‘sight’ to another without looking at anything that is not set down in Baedeker<sup>10</sup>” (“Vice” 516). Wharton’s descriptions of Undine throughout the novel indicate that she is just such a person, someone more concerned with an outward appearance of upper class, believing that being of the upper-class only requires you to perform a part, completing tasks on a checklist. In this way, Undine resembles the middle-class reader attempting reading up as a way to achieve upward class mobility. That this ultimately fails—Undine never does grasp the proper way to behave – goes to show that to Wharton, even if one achieves some semblance of upward class mobility, there is no way to truly belong to the upper class unless you are born into it.

The only library in which Undine seems to be comfortable is Moffatt’s. Moffatt’s

---

<sup>10</sup>*Baedeker Guides* are travel guide books published by the Karl Baedeker firm of Germany beginning in the 1830s. For more information on this, see Rudy Koshar’s July 1998 article “‘What Ought to Be Seen’: Tourists’ Guidebooks and National Identities in Modern Germany and Europe” in *Journal of Contemporary History* or Sara Blair’s 2004 article “Local Modernity, Global Modernism: Bloomsbury and the Places of the Literary” in *English Literary History*.

library is “the great high-ceilinged library of a private hotel” (1003; ch. XLVI). By far the most regal of libraries in the novel, it has bookcases “closed with gilt trellising” (1004; ch. XLVI). Moffatt’s library has “rows and rows of books, bound in dim browns and golds, and old faded reds as rich as velvet: they all looked as if they might have had stories in them as splendid as their bindings. But the bookcases were closed with gilt trellising...that Mr. Moffatt's secretary kept...locked because the books were too valuable to be taken down” (1004; ch. XLVI). This library seems to have the splendor Undine has strived for throughout her career of marriages. Moffatt, like Undine, calls to mind a mechanical reader. One of the ways Wharton describes a mechanical reader as “viewing all books from the outside, and having no point of contact with the author’s mind” and continues that “with him the book’s the thing: the idea of using it as a keynote of unpremeditated harmonies...is beyond his ken” (Vice 516). Moffatt is never described reading books or engaging with them in any way. Clearly, Moffatt only appreciates the books for their outward value. In some ways, Moffatt’s library is reminiscent of the Trenor library in *The House of Mirth*. The Trenor library is as regal as Moffat’s library, but also as ancient as Raymond’s, and although it has the history of an old money estate, it seems to be as ill-used as Moffatt’s library. The distinction to be noted between the Trenor library and the Moffatt library is that the Trenor library goes back generations, and some of those generations of the family included born readers. The Moffatt library, on the other hand, is for show only, clearly depicting mechanical readers. A comparison between Moffatt and Percy Gryce of *The House of Mirth* can also be drawn, with Gryce depicted as superior. It is clear that both Gryce and Moffatt are collectors, yet there remains a distinction between the two. Although we can broadly categorize the two together, there

remains a sense of old money superiority since Gryce's passion is for books rather than Moffatt's way of collecting to prove social status and wealth.

Though Undine can appreciate the library's splendor despite its lack of functionality, the reader sees the absurdity of the library through the eyes of Paul Marvell. Paul, like his father Ralph and stepfather Raymond, enjoys books. And like his father and stepfather, he does not seem to be able to keep his mother's attention. The thought of a library in which books are not for reading confounds Paul. This idea seems entirely in keeping with Moffatt's character, however. The narrator notes earlier that Moffatt's room at the Nouveau Luxe contained no books. The lack of books starkly contrasts the descriptions of Ralph and Raymond, who are both often described among their books. It seems to be no coincidence that the characters coming from "old money" tend to be surrounded by books, whereas the characters with the *nouveau riche* label use books as objects to illustrate their wealth. Moffatt is a collector, not a reader. Here in the glamor of Moffatt's library, Undine belongs as another item that has been bought and put on display by Moffatt. As Undine has climbed through the social ranks, she has become more objectified. Though Moffatt presumably first married Undine for love when they were young lovers in Apex, Undine over time became an object for Moffatt, something for him to purchase and display as a sign of his wealth. Just as the books in Moffatt's library are too valuable to be taken out to read, Undine was too valuable a prize for Moffatt to lose, and yet, she has lost her value in the eyes of the old New York society as well as with the Ambassadors at court—two groups of people who consider marrying divorcees an unacceptable faux pas. In many ways, Undine becomes a caricature of the mechanical reading social climber Wharton criticizes. Wharton does not offer redemption or the

possibility of control of the library to Undine, unlike she does with other heroines.

Undine's relish in being written about in the gossip sheets is at odds with Wharton's opinions of lowbrow magazines and texts, and acts to highlight the uncertainty surrounding how the changing audience for her works would impact Wharton's legacy.

## CHAPTER VI

### COUNTESS OLENSKA: SOCIETY OUTSIDER AND BORN READER

Unlike in *The House of Mirth* when Selden welcomes Lily into his library, granting her a place in which she could experience security and pause for introspection, Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) maintains his library as his own space, never fully inviting his wife into its comfort and security. Newland spends much of his time in his library, which his wife “let him arrange...as he pleased...with ‘sincere’ Eastlake furniture, and the plain new bookcases without glass doors” (59; bk. 1 ch. 9). Newland enjoys reading, and May comments that “when there’s nothing particular to do he reads a book,” but we can see in this description that reading is not as important to Newland as it is to other characters in Wharton’s fiction (182; bk. 2 ch. 22). Newland seems to be in the same social circle as Selden, Ralph, and Raymond of previous Wharton novels—he has a library decorated in a manner which would meet Wharton’s approval, and he enjoys reading his books, not merely treating them as collectibles. In comparison to other characters in *The Age of Innocence*, he falls short of being a born reader for whom the act of reading is something done “as unconsciously as he breathes” (“Vice” 513).



In other novels, although the libraries were the man's domain, women were present in them either for romantic dalliances or as decoration, there were other men in those novels who acted differently, and wanted to share the libraries with women. Raymond attempts to get Undine interested in reading and spending time with him in his library, and Selden invites Lily into his library where she can feel safe. Newland, on the other hand, seems to want to keep his wife from feeling too welcome in his library. May spends time in Newland's library, but her presence seems to make Newland uncomfortable, for example, with May present "the room is stifling" (243; bk. 2 ch. 30). Newland even begins choosing books to read in her presence based on whether he thinks she will ask him to read it aloud to her:

Because he could always foresee her comments on what he read. In the days of their engagement she had simply (as he now perceived) echoed what he told her; but since he had ceased to provide her with opinions she had begun to hazard her own, with results destructive to his enjoyment of the works commented on. (242-243; bk 2 ch.30)

We find out later that Newland and May's son took his first steps in the library, while the women, May and the nurse, remained "behind the door"—both father and son experience important events of their lives in the library, and the women watch from outside the library (284-285; bk. 2 ch. 34). Although the library is decorated properly, according to Wharton's standards, Newland's use of books to distance himself from his wife indicates that he cannot be considered a born reader.

While Newland may be uncomfortable, or unwilling, sharing the library with his wife, one may wonder if he would feel the same way with Countess Olenska. While we are getting a picture of Newland's relationship with May through the way he describes his interactions with his wife in the library, we also get a clear image of his feelings toward the Countess from the way in which Newland reacts to her drawing room. Although the

Countess does not have a library in her home, she does have a drawing room that houses many books. Countess Olenska has “books scattered about her drawing room (a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of place’), though chiefly works of fiction, had whetted Archer’s interest with such new names as those of Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers” (84; bk. 1, ch. 12). Clearly, Countess Olenska is the born reader in this novel, and not Newland Archer. The Countess is one of the exceptions to Wharton’s general rule of men maintaining control of the library and in turn, the woman. The Countess has left her husband and is in complete control of her home, including the books that she chooses to keep in it. In “Domesticity Beyond Sentiment: Edith Wharton, Decoration, and Divorce,” while discussing the design of *The Mount*, Susan Fraiman states that “rather than simply rejecting the domestic sphere as confinement to family, Wharton managed, with surprising success, to configure it as a personal refuge *from* family” (488). It seems as though the Countess is also able to do this, she has rejected a traditional domestic lifestyle and created her own personal refuge in her home. Wharton has presented Countess Olenska, a character who has left behind her husband and the corresponding domesticity, as the born reader rather than May or Newland who are more in line with traditional upper-class behavior.

Despite the fact that Newland seems uncomfortable with his wife in his library, his affection for Countess Olenska, who creates her domestic space including books, may make him more likable to readers. As Benert notes, perhaps his discomfort with May has less to do with her than with his feelings for the Countess: “Newland comes to identify with his library as the only place he can reliably be himself, the place where the most important events in his family life have occurred; it is in effect his makeshift equivalent

for an authentic emotional and intellectual life with Ellen” (191). Though this would be a convenient way to add a feminine presence to Newland’s library, it is complicated and challenged by Newland’s observation:

As he sat looking with new eyes at the library which, for over thirty years, had been the scene of his solitary musings and of all the family confabulations...But above all—sometimes Archer put it above all—it was in that library that the Governor of New York...had turned to his host, and said...‘Hang the professional politician! You’re the kind of man the country wants, Archer.’” (284-285; bk. 2 ch. 34)

If Archer’s best memory, amongst all family memories, is that of a male-male interaction, it seems hard to believe that the library acts as an “equivalent for an authentic emotional and intellectual life with Ellen” (191). Wharton continues her use of libraries to reflect men’s personalities with Newland, and yet she provides a glimpse into a different type of domestic space through the Countess’ home. Although the Countess is separated from her husband, Wharton seems to regard her differently than Undine, whose divorces are seen as gauche. The Countess’ social status and her natural ability to navigate society set her apart from Undine who uses divorce as a means to social climb, and never exhibits the self-possession of a woman capable of taking control of the gendered space of the library.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION: WHARTON'S BORN READER AND THE WOMAN WHO LOVES HIM

Wharton depicts various born and mechanical readers throughout her works. In most cases, it is up to the reader to infer which characters are being depicted as each type of reader. In "New Year's Day," one of four novellas comprising Wharton's *Old New York*, Wharton labels the born reader for us. The novella presents readers with another couple with distinctly different views of reading. Lizzie Hazeldean's invalid husband spends much of his time in his library amongst his books, somewhat reminiscent of Raymond de Chelles in *The Custom of the Country*. Mr. Hazeldean's library "was a rosy room" with "many books" (501, 503; ch. II and III). Mr. Hazeldean constantly keeps busy with reading and Lizzie cannot understand how someone could enjoy passing their time with reading. Early in the novella, the reader learns that Lizzie and her husband joke about her not understanding his love of reading. The narrator describes Mr. Hazeldean as a "born reader" and makes the distinction between his reading and the type of readers Lizzie's mother and those like her were: "feverish devourers of circulating library fiction" (505; ch. III). The only interactions Lizzie had with books and reading before marrying

had been “like her stepmother, the retired opera-singer, feverish devourers of circulating library fiction: she had never before lived in a house with books in it” (505; ch. III). To Lizzie, the passion of reading that her husband had “remained for her as much of a mystery as on the day when she had first surprised him, mute and absorbed, over what the people she had always lived with would have called ‘a deep book’” (504; ch. III).

Though it seems to remain a mystery to Lizzie, the narrator states:

Gradually she had learned to take a pride in Hazeldean’s reading, as if it had been some rare accomplishment; she had perceived that it reflected credit on him, and was even conscious of its adding to the charm of his talk, a charm she had always felt without being able to define it. But still, in her heart of hearts she regarded books as a mere expedient, and felt sure that they were only an aid to patience, like jackstraws or a game of patience, with the disadvantage of requiring greater mental effort. (504-505; ch. III)

Lizzie has an appreciation for reading despite her inability to cultivate the practice in herself. She seems to consider it a shortcoming that she does not enjoy reading: “‘If only I cared more for reading,’ she moaned, remembering how vainly she had tried to acquire her husband’s tastes, and how gently and humorously he had smiled at her efforts” (538; ch. VI). This description of Mr. Hazeldean as gentle and smiling at Lizzie’s efforts at reading stands in stark contrast to the way May’s attempts at commenting on Newland’s reading was “destructive to his enjoyment” (*Age* 243; bk. 2 ch.30). The differences between Newland and Mr. Hazeldean offers further proof that although Newland was part of the moneyed set, he was not Wharton’s ideal born reader. Instead, the kind, caring, understanding Mr. Hazeldean acts as the personification of Wharton’s born reader ideals.

Mr. Hazeldean is not the only reader in the story who is taken with Lizzie despite her lack of interest in reading. The narrator of “New Year’s Day” first became acquainted with Lizzie when he was a young boy visiting his grandparents’ home. The story begins

with him reminiscing about the first time he saw Lizzie. He also has a love of reading like Mr. Hazeldean and upon seeing that Lizzie owns books, and mistakenly thinking she read them as well, thinks more highly of her. Upon describing Lizzie's home after Mr. Hazeldean dies, the narrator notes that there were books on the table and continues: "I have spoken of books; even then they were usually the first objects to attract me in a room, whatever else of beauty it contained" (542; ch. VII). He continues reminiscing that his initial assumption about Lizzie's love of reading, calling her a "goddess" and seemingly astonished about this, imagines: "She could accompany one on those flights too? Lead one, no doubt? My heart beat high... But I soon learned that Lizzie Hazeldean did not read. She turned but languidly even the pages of the last Ouida novel; and I remember seeing Mallock's New Republic uncut on her table for weeks" (542; ch. VII). Interestingly, the narrator does not lose interest in Lizzie once he realizes she does not read even the more popular fiction he references. Wharton seemingly uses "The Vice of Reading" as her guide for creating these characters. Mr. Hazeldean has all of the characteristics of a born reader, and is even stated as being such, and Lizzie accepts that she just was not born with the talent for reading. Although Lizzie is not a born reader, because she accepts this and does not assume that she can become a reader like her husband merely by reading the same books he does, she meets with Wharton's (and the story's other born readers') approval.

Lizzie desperately wants to enjoy reading, but seems to understand that being a reader is not something self-taught. Lizzie takes pride in Mr. Hazeldean's reading and points out that there have been times that she did enjoy reading. Lizzie speaks of Mr. Hazeldean almost reverentially: "He was a great reader: a student. And he tried so hard to

make me read too—he wanted to share everything with me. And I did like poetry—some poetry—when he read it aloud to me” (543; ch. VII). She even continues after her husband’s death to try to read his books to regain a connection with him. Perhaps as a reward for her consistent attempts to enjoy reading, Lizzie eventually finds books that can remind her of Charles and upon this discovery:

The house no longer seemed lonely, nor the hours tedious; there had even been found for her, among the books she had so often tried to read, those books which had long looked at her with such hostile faces, two or three (they were always on her bed) containing messages from the world where Charles was waiting. (549;ch. VII)

Lizzie and Countess Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, seem to be the exceptions to the previously established argument of male control of libraries and it is no coincidence that they are also the characters that do not have husbands present when they gain control. Though her husband controls the library during his life, Lizzie takes control of the library after his death and cultivates her own love of her husband’s books. Taking into account the other autobiographical aspects Wharton projects onto Lizzie, one can assume Lizzie is the type of woman with whom Wharton wants the reader to sympathize. Stephenson notes, “In both her real and fictional houses, Wharton particularly privileged libraries and other spaces for reading and writing” as such, it is not a stretch to assume Lizzie too is in a privileged place amongst her fictional works (1099). The library at The Mount was another exception; there is no doubt that Wharton was in complete control of her home and library. Wharton had a “book-filled private library...located directly below her bedroom suite, where she wrote *The House of Mirth* and other early fiction” (1099). The masculine space of the library in the otherwise female domain of the home, the library can become a woman’s space with the proper respect for the purpose of the room and sufficient social status.

Each of the libraries discussed here reflects back to the readers who occupy them. Those who use libraries to display their wealth and do not treat the books as items to love, read, and care for (as Raymond, Ralph, Paul, and Charles do) are presented as undesirable, and perhaps even slightly laughable. Libraries belonging to men, and the rare woman, of pedigreed families, hold a higher value to Wharton than the libraries of the *nouveau riche* who use the space to display wealth rather than knowledge. Though Wharton maintains the notion of the library as a private space for men, she also seems to be making a statement about the need for women to have their own spaces. Wharton explicitly notes the concern of women not having personal space in her non-fiction work, and she offers a solution to the problem in her depiction of Lizzie and Ellen. Only in rejecting traditional domesticity can women claim their own space in their homes, something Wharton too was willing to do in order to control her own home and engage in her own professional and personal pursuits. Despite Wharton's rejection of traditional domesticity for women, her seeming refusal to look beyond class distinctions as she relates to her readers suggests she may not be as progressive as one may assume. Her clear demarcation of proper born readers and imitators in her fiction suggests an underlying insecurity that her works could get lost among the libraries of the mechanical readers. Lizzie Hazeldean provides Wharton's readers a glimpse into her hopes that her works may be appreciated even in the hands of someone who is not a born reader.



## WORKS CITED

- Balestra, Gianfranca. "“For the Use of the Magazine Morons’: Edith Wharton Rewrites the Tale Of the Fantastic.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 13-24.
- Benert, Annette. *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. Print.
- Blair, Amy L. "Misreading *The House of Mirth*." *American Literature* 76.1 (2004): 149-175.
- Fraiman, Susan. "Domesticity beyond Sentiment: Edith Wharton, Decoration, and Divorce." *American Literature*. 83.3 (2011): 479-507.
- Jones, Suzanne W. "Edith Wharton's 'Secret Sensitiveness' The Decoration of Houses, and Her Fiction." *Journal of Modern Literature*. 21.2 (1997): 175-196.
- Killoran, Helen. *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001. Print.
- Snyder, Thomas D. ed. *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. National Center for Education Statistics, 1993. Print.
- Stephenson, Liisa. "Decorating Fiction: Edith Wharton's Literary Architecture." *University of Toronto Quarterly*. 79.4 (2010): 1096-1104.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Print.
- van der Werf, Els. "'A Woman's Nature is Like a Great House Full of Rooms': Edith Wharton's Personal and Fictional Representation of Homes." *Home Cultures*. 6.2 (2009): 179-198.

Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

---. *The Custom of the Country*. *Edith Wharton's Novels*. New York: The Library of America, 1985. 622-1014. Print.

---. *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990. Print.

---. *Old New York*. *Edith Wharton Novellas and Other Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1990. 313-549. Print.

---. "The Vice of Reading." *The North American Review* 177 (October 1903): 513-521.

Wharton, Edith, and Ogden Codman, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses*. 1897. New York: The Mount Press, 2007. Print.